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## The Language Learner

‘Each child has a different learning style and pace. Each child is unique, not only capable of learning but also capable of succeeding’ (Robert John Mehan)

### Introduction

Understanding the way in which learners differ from one another is of fundamental concern to those involved in second-language acquisition. Some learners almost achieve the native speaker’s level of competence in a foreign language and make rapid and effortless progress while others progress very slowly and with great difficulty. The reason is that people are not homogenous. They have different ages, personalities, learning strategies and styles. The following lecture is an exploration of some of differences which are interlocked and play important roles in language learning. It is also an opportunity for teachers to understand the many sources of diversity in the classroom and to develop an open mind when interpreting students’ thinking and behaviour.

### 1-Individual Learner Differences

#### 1.1. Age

The age of learners is a major factor in teachers’ decisions about how and what to teach. Learners of different ages have different needs, competences, and cognitive skills. In fact, there are a number of commonly held beliefs about age. For instance, it is said that children are faster language learners than adults. They can pick up new languages effortlessly. Another belief is that adolescents are unmotivated and uncooperative learners while adults have so many barriers to learning and they only rarely have any success. There is some truth in many of these beliefs, but they can be misleading because they suggest that everyone is the same. Yet, each learner is an individual with different experiences both in and outside the classroom. (Harmer, 2001)

As Harmer (2001) put it, learners can be divided into three categories: **young children, adolescents (teenagers) and adults.**

### **1.1.1 Young children**

A common belief is that children are better learners than adults. It is also believed that there is a critical period hypothesis in one's life (during childhood) when second language acquisition is optimized. Lateralization of the language function is normally completed at puberty and successful acquisition of a second language after this age becomes difficult due to physiological changes in the brain. But later research failed to support this hypothesis in full. Researchers have found that those who begin learning a language late in life are capable of gaining high level proficiency. The only problem is that after puberty, they are unable to acquire a native-like accent.

Young children, especially those up to the ages of nine or ten have the following characteristics:

- They respond to meaning even if they do not understand individual words.
- They often learn indirectly rather than directly. They learn from everything around them.
- Their understanding comes not just from explanation, but also from what they see and hear.
- They have a need for individual attention and approval from the teacher.

(Harmer, *ibid*: 38)

Good teachers at this level need to provide a rich diet of learning experiences which encourages their learners to get information from a variety of sources. Moreover, classrooms have to be bright and colourful to avoid boredom.

### **1.1.2 Adolescents**

Penny Ur (as cited in Harmer, 2001) suggests that teenage students are in fact the best language learners. This is only part of the picture. One of the key issues in adolescence is the search for individual identity. Learners' identity has to be forged among classmates; peer approval may be considerably more important for the student than the attention of the teacher. Apart from the need for self-esteem and the peer approval, adolescents can cause discipline problems. In this case, teachers should know how to control them in a supportive and constructive way.

Indeed, teenagers have a great capacity to learn, a great potential for creativity, and a passionate commitment to things which interest them when they are engaged. Therefore, teachers must provoke

students' engagement with material which is relevant and involving. They must also give them tasks which they are able to do, rather than risk humiliating them.

### **1.1.3 Adults**

Adult language learners are notable for a number of special characteristics:

- They can engage with abstract thought.
- They have a whole range of life experiences to draw on.
- They have expectations about the learning process.
- Unlike young children and teenagers, they often have a clear understanding of why they are learning and what they want to get out of it. (Harmer, *ibid* : 40)

However, adults are never entirely problem-free learners. They can be critical of teaching methods. They may have experienced failure or criticism at school which makes them anxious and under-confident about learning a language. As a result, good teachers should take all these factors into account. They should encourage these adult learners to use their own life experience in the learning process and minimize the bad effects of past learning experiences.

## **2. Gender**

A popular belief is that girls are 'better' L2 learners than boys. Certainly, girls achieve higher language related exams. This is likely to be a consequence of social and cultural norms, which from an early age lead to the development of more effective social interaction skills and strategies in girls than boys. This is helpful in language learning. Some scholars as Oxford (1993) and Young & Oxford (1997) have found that gender can have a significant impact on how students learn a language. Such studies have found that females tend to show greater integrative motivation and more positive attitudes to L2 learning. They also tend to use a wider range of learning strategies. Zhuanghin (as cited in Zafar & Meenakshi, 2012:640) highlighted that females learn to speak earlier than male and learn a foreign language faster and better than males.

Moreover, Nyikos (as cited in Moreno, 2010) states that it would seem safe to generalize that both males and females can be good language learners. The ongoing challenge for teachers is to discover how both their male and female students may be supported to achieve maximum success as language learners. In short, the differential treatment of boys and girls at home and in classroom can have a strong impact on students' identity and academic development. Thus, teachers should make

special efforts to think about their expectations to ensure equal treatment for both males and females. (Moreno, 2010)

### **3. Intelligence**

There is no agreement on what intelligence means. Some experts define intelligence as problem-solving ability. Others describe it as the ability to adapt to and learn from life's everyday experiences. Most experts believe that intelligence is the result of a combination of nature / nurture interaction or factors. Sternberg (2018: 2) notes that "*intelligence is often seen in terms of ability to learn and reason and in terms of adaptation to the environment.*" He also believes that people's intelligence can be enhanced by providing them with opportunities to think analytically, creatively and practically. Intelligence is not fixed. It can be enhanced in the classroom for all learners.

### **4. Language Aptitude**

Language aptitude has been defined differently by scholars as reported in (Hall, 2011). For instance, it is defined in terms of 'speed in language learning' (Ranta, 2008:142). Moreover, Skehan, (1989:38) suggests that 'language aptitude is consistently one of the most successful predictors of language learning success.' Carroll (1990) defines aptitude in terms of:

- 1-The ability to identify sounds, remember and link them to phonetic symbols (**auditory**)
- 2- Sensitivity to grammatical structures in a sentence (**linguistic**)
  - The ability to learn inductively (**linguistic**)
- 3- The ability to rote / learn vocabulary items (**memory**)

Many scholars believe that aptitude alone does not determine the language learning ability of an individual. Skehan (1989) suggests that individual ability may vary because of other factors like personality, language learning styles and strategies, and motivation.

### **5- Motivation**

William and Burden (1997:120) suggest that motivation is 'a state of cognitive and emotional arousal 'that' leads to conscious decision to act'. Motivation is necessary to sustain both short- term and long-term goals (e.g. completing a classroom activity, or studying a language over a period of years) and operates within a broader context of social and cultural influences.

According to Gardner and Lambert (1972) the following two types of motivation exist:

- **Integrative:** Learners with integrative orientation study because they identify with the target culture. Here the learner wants to resemble and behave like the target community.

- **Instrumental:** Instrumentally oriented learners learn the L2 for pragmatic reasons such as passing an exam or getting a better job.

Both types have different roles to play and both can lead to success. Motivation can also be **Intrinsic** and **Extrinsic**.

-**Intrinsic:** It comes from within the individual and might for e.g. results from the pleasure or enjoyment a learner feels when learning.

-**Extrinsic:** It comes from outside the learner who might wish to gain a reward or avoid punishment.

Moreno (2010: 385-386) proposes the following teaching strategies to help students promote their intrinsic motivation and develop a sense of competence:

**1-Setting achievable goals:** This may help students build a history of success that will empower them to engage in future tasks. Effective goals are specific, moderately challenging and proximal. Teachers should provide scaffolding by modeling, thinking aloud and giving hints to promote learners' self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation.

**2-Providing learning aids for complex tasks:** Providing students with learning aids can help them gain a sense of competency, especially when asked to engage in inquiry, problem-solving learning, and any constructivist activity that requires high-order thinking.

**3-Give informational feedback:** Informational feedback focuses on giving students information about how their performance can be improved, leading to a greater intrinsic motivation.

**4- Providing frequent and varied feedback:** Frequent informational feedback provides students with helpful information about the areas in which they need improvement and communicate their successes and strengths.

**5- Allow students to learn from their mistakes:** When mistakes are taken as a learning opportunity, students are likely to see them as a mechanism to improve their knowledge and skills.

**6- Use praise effectively:** Praise is one of the most effective extrinsic motivator to learn. When praise is used carefully, it can encourage students to be proud of themselves and be confident in their abilities and accomplishments.

## **7- Emphasize the relationship between effort and learning**

Furthermore, teachers can clearly play an important role in motivating foreign language learners by selecting effective classroom activities, creating a pleasant and relaxed atmosphere in the classroom, increasing learners' linguistic self-confidence and finally promoting learner autonomy.

## **6- Learner Autonomy**

Holec (as cited in Benson, 2001) defines autonomy as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning'. Many applied linguists suggest that autonomy is a capacity, something that learners can have and can develop, rather than a set of procedures that learners do (Cotterall, 2008). Moreover, Benson (2003:290) states that 'autonomy can never be an all or nothing matter. There are degrees of autonomy, and autonomy may also take many different forms'

Thus, autonomy is not limited to learning without a teacher. Autonomy is significant because as stated by Benson (2001:2):

Learners who lack autonomy are capable of developing it given appropriate conditions and preparation. The conditions for the development of autonomy include the opportunity to exercise control over learning. The ways in which we organize the practice of teaching and learning therefore have an important influence on the development of autonomy among our learners.

In effect, teachers can work with learners to develop autonomy in language learning, by exchanging knowledge, consulting and negotiating with learners who have to take more responsibility for their own learning.

## **7- Learning Styles**

A learning style is 'an individual's preferred means of acquiring knowledge and skills or a particular way in which an individual learns'. (Pritchard, 2009:41)

Learning styles are not wholly innate and therefore not completely fixed traits which an individual will display. Learners are able to adopt different styles in different contexts. Several researchers have found that learning styles might be influenced by nationality or the learners' culture of learning. A study by Reid (1987) revealed that Korean language learners tend towards visual learning styles while Arabic and Chinese learners seem to prefer auditory learning.

Honey and Mumford (as cited in Pritchard, 2009:43) suggested four learning styles:

**1-Activists:** They prefer to learn by doing rather than, for example, by reading or listening.

**2-Reflectors:** They stand back and observe. They like to collect as much information as possible before making any decisions.

**3-Theorists:** They like to adapt and integrate all of their observations into frameworks, so that they are able to see how one observation is related to other observations.

**4-Pragmatists:** They look for the practical implications of any new ideas or theories before making a judgment on their value.

These four dimensions can be used as a way of classifying learners. Most people have characteristics of all four dimensions. Over many years, and through many research projects, three particular learning styles have been identified as reported by (Pritchard, 2009:44 - 45).

**1-Visual learners:** They prefer learning by seeing. They have good visual recall and prefer information to be presented visually in the form of diagrams, graphs, maps, posters and displays.

**2-Auditory learners:** They prefer learning by listening. They have good auditory memory and benefit from discussion, lectures, interviewing, hearing stories and audio-materials.

**3-Kinaesthetic learners:** They prefer to learn by doing. They enjoy physical activity and manipulating objects.

An over-reliance on one style, and an inability or unwillingness to adopt another style where it might be appropriate, can limit some learning situations and hinder the learning process. What is successful for one learner may not work well for another. Dornyei (2005) suggests that classroom practices should aim to accommodate a range of learning styles in order to maximize learning opportunities for all learners, recommending a 'principled eclecticism'. Finally, learners may be 'empowered' to become more effective students if they are taught learning strategies which suit their learning styles.

## **8-Language Learning Strategies**

According to O'Malley & Chamot (1990), language learning strategies are the tools for active, self-directed involvement needed for developing L2 communicative ability. For Oxford (1990:8), they are 'specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more self-directed, and more transferable to new situations.'

Language Learning Strategies are both mental and physical activities which are to some degree, consciously chosen by learners in order to fulfill a specific purpose or achieve a specific goal. These strategies have been categorized in various ways; Oxford (1990) provided one of the most well-known taxonomies.

### **Direct Strategies**

#### **-Memory Strategies**

.To remember more effectively

#### **-Cognitive Strategies**

.To use all one's mental processes

#### **-Compensation Strategies**

.To compensate for missing knowledge

### **Indirect Strategies**

#### **-Metacognitive Strategies**

.To organize and evaluate learning

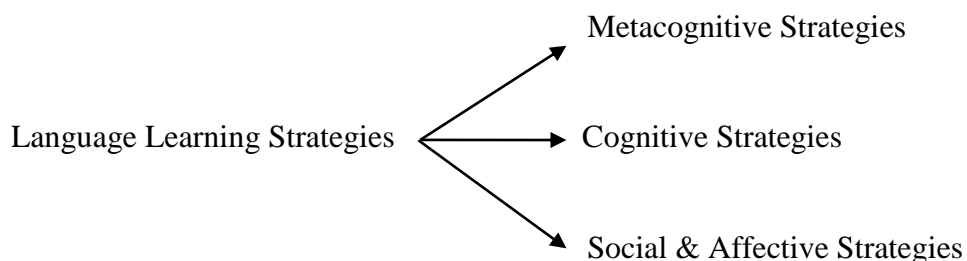
#### **-Affective Strategies**

.To manage emotions (anxiety)

#### **-Social Strategies**

.To learn with others

O'Malley and Chamot (1990:137-139) classified them differently and suggested three categories:



Finally, Oxford (1990) noted that strategies are especially important for language learning because they give to learners the opportunity to take conscious control of their own learning and become more self- directed and autonomous. Besides, the use of appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence.

## **9- Personality**

‘Who we are’ affects ‘what we do’. Learners bring a wide range of personality features to the classroom. These features may influence the way learners interact with what teachers do. The study of the relation of personality and language learning has been the subject of scholars like Krashen (1985), Skehan (1989) and Ehrman (1996). They suggested that there is a clear relationship between personality and second language acquisition (SLA) as personality determines what people feel



comfortable with. There are a number of personality traits which either facilitate or hinder second language acquisition. These include: self-esteem, extroversion, introversion, risk-taking, inhibition and anxiety.

## **9.1 Self-esteem**

“Self-esteem expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which individuals believe themselves to be capable, significant, successful and worthy.” (Coopersmith as cited in Brown, 2000:145). In short, self-esteem is a personal judgment of worthiness. It is generally a positive self-image of oneself.

Allman et al (2000) noted that people who have high self-esteem are confident, resourceful, independent, responsible and accept challenges. On the other hand, people with low self-esteem lack confidence in themselves and need constant reassurance. They avoid taking challenges.

Learners gain self-esteem when they are treated with esteem. Stephanie Marston, in her book *The Magic of Encouragement* (1990) points out four factors that she believes are critical to the development of high self-esteem: belonging – uniqueness – power and self-expression.

### **9.1.1 A sense of belonging**

Children like adults need to feel emotionally connected to the people who are important to them. These connections give them a sense of belonging that results in feelings of security and contentedness. It is essential for students to feel welcome and relaxed in the classroom and understand that their contributions to the class are important.

### **9.1.2 A sense of uniqueness**

At school, teachers can enhance creativity and learning by recognizing each student’s uniqueness and building on his particular strengths. Teachers can better develop self-esteem by encouraging each student to examine how his special qualities enable him to be a unique and important member of his family, his class and the world at large.

### **9.1.3 A sense of power**

Students gain a sense of personal power when they see themselves as decision makers, goal setters and problem solvers. When students feel competent in these three roles, their self-esteem is heightened greatly (posting classroom rules, suggesting topics and activities).

### **9.1.4 Freedom of expression**

When learners are allowed to express themselves openly and honestly, there is an opportunity for the development of meaningful communication and mutual respect. Teachers should listen to what students say and respond to their words with respect.

## **9.2 Extroversion vs. Introversion**

According to Zafar and Meenakshi (2012), extroverts are considered sociable and impulsive. They seem to dislike solitude and take risks, whereas; introverts are believed to be introspective, quiet, retiring and reserved. They are more likely to be involved in individual activities. Moreover, scholars like Krashen (1985); Swain (1985) and Cook (2001) declared that being an introvert does not necessarily imply being a better language learner. Second language literature suggests that extrovert language learners prefer communicative and group activities. Therefore, they increase their interaction in the language which maximizes the language output i.e. language proficiency. However, research does not always support this conclusion. Some studies have found that extroverts do not get high scores and are not able to be better language learners in contrast to introverts who are more concerned with the inner words of ideas and can be good language learners.

## **9.3 Anxiety**

Anxiety is generally associated with the feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension, or worry. Recent research acknowledges that not all anxiety is bad and a certain amount of tension can have a positive effect and facilitate learning. Therefore, too much and too little anxiety may hinder the process of successful second language learning. Researchers such as (Brown, as cited in Dornyei, 2005: 198) declared that anxiety is possibly the affective factor that most previously obstructs the learning process. For this reason, it has been the limelight of L2 research.

Brown (2000: 151) further states that three components of foreign language anxiety have been identified. They are:

- i. Communication apprehension, arising from learner's inability to adequately express mature thoughts and ideas;
- ii. Fear of negative social evaluation, arising from a learner's need to make a positive social impression on others;
- iii. Test anxiety or apprehension over academic evaluation

## **9.4 Inhibition**

Inhibition is the set of defenses an individual builds to protect himself. The presence of a language ego is considered to be a major hindrance to the process of second language acquisition. Therefore, the processes of making mistake and learn from them get inhibited by this ego.

According to Brown (2000), language teaching approaches in the last three decades have been characterized by the creation of context in which students are made to feel free to take risks. Moreover,

Brown (ibid: 145) argued that: *“If we never ventured to speak a sentence until we were absolutely certain of its total correctness, we would likely never communicate productively at all”*. In short, learners with higher self-esteem and ego strength are more able to withstand threats to their existence.

## **9.5 Risk-Taking**

Risk-taking is an important characteristic of successful learning of a second language. To feel comfortable, risk-takers create a climate of acceptance that stimulates their self-confidence and encourages them to experiment and discover the target language and take risks of being wrong without feeling embarrassed. Self-esteem seems to be closely connected to a risk-taking factor. Brown (ibid) declared that a learner with high global self-esteem is not daunted by the possible consequences of being laughed at when taking risks and making mistakes.

Zafar and Meenakshi (2012) reported that though risk-taking is useful to some extent, high risk-taking will not always yield positive results in second language learning. Thus, it is not always good to be impulsive. Instead, learners should make accurate guesses to be successful learners

## **10. Characteristics of Good Language Learners**

Good language learners are assumed to be those who employed good language learning strategies in achieving successful language learning. Zare (2012); Rubin (1975); Stern (1975); Rubin and Thompson (1994) described “good” language learners in terms of their personal characteristics, styles, and strategies. They believe that good language learners:

1. Take responsibility of their own learning.
2. Organize information about language.
3. Are creative and try experimenting in grammar and words.
4. Create opportunities for practice inside and outside of the classroom.
5. Learn to live with uncertainty by not getting confused and by continuing to talk or listen without understanding every word.
6. Use memory strategies to recall what has been learnt.
7. Make errors work for them and not against them.

8. Use linguistic knowledge, including knowledge of the first language, in learning a second language.
9. Use contextual clues to help them in comprehension.
10. Learn to make intelligent guesses.
11. Learn to use certain tricks to keep the conversation going.
12. Learn to fill gaps in their own incompetence.
13. Learn different styles of speech and writing to vary their language with relevance to the formality of the situation. (Dyanthi et al, 2016: 133-134)

## **Conclusion**

Finally, one can deduce that individual learner differences play a significant role in the acquisition of second and foreign language learning. Therefore, second language teachers apart from imparting knowledge must also be psychologists who can change their teaching methodology according to their learners' differences in order to increase learners' efficiency and success.

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